Can Sex Differences in Meta-Awareness of Emotions Explain Incarceration Differences?

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ABSTRACT
Men have a 1 in 11 chance of going to prison sometime during their lives, whereas the chance for women is 1 in 91 (Bonczar & Beck, 1997). Unlike race and social class, gender differences in imprisonment have only recently been examined (Chambliss 1972; Crew, 1991). General strain theory might partially explain these gender differences. It argues that criminal violence increases when individuals cannot relieve distress from negative emotional experiences (Agnew, 1992). If individuals cannot reflect upon and manage their emotions, they should experience more emotional strain. Perhaps men are more violent because these abilities—called meta-awareness of emotions (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Pafla, 1995)—are lower in women. This study compares men and women in terms of meta-awareness of emotions. Previous research has sometimes found men pay less attention to their emotions (Thayer, Rossy, Ruiz-Padial, & Johnsen, 2003), but see Fernandez, Extremera, & Ramos, 2004), but has not yet shown reduced ability to repair emotions. We hypothesize men will score lower than women on all aspects of meta-awareness of emotions. A total of 217 undergraduates completed the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995), which contains three subscales: Attention, Clarity, and Repair. Men scored significantly lower on Attention, but differences on Clarity and Repair were non-significant.

METHOD

Research has found that meta-awareness of emotions in criminals in order to understand criminality from a psychological or emotional perspective (e.g., Moniarty, Stough, Tidmarsh, Eger, & Dennison, 2001; Malterer, Glass, & Newman, 2003). General strain theory suggests that criminals cannot release their emotions (Thayer et al., 2003). This negative result should be interpreted with two limitations in mind. First, the TMMS is a self-report instrument (Salovey et al., 1995). Men claim that they are as good as women to attend to one's emotions, Attention (the ability to identify those emotions clearly), and Repair (the ability to sustain positive moods and repair negative moods). It contains 30 items: for Attention, 11 for Clarity, and 8 for Repair. Items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Thus, the total scores can range from 30 to 150. Internal consistencies are high: Attention (α = .86), Clarity (α = .88), and Repair (α = .82; Salovey et al., 1995).

RESULTS

Men scored significantly lower on the Attention scale than women. Men also scored lower on the Repair scale, but the differences were non-significant. Finally, men scored higher on the Clarity scale, but the differences were also non-significant (see Table 1).

Table 1

| Table Means (and Standard Deviations) for Men and Women on the TMMS |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Branch          | Men             | Women            |
|                 | t-test           |
| Attention       | 3.73 (.47)       | 3.89 (.47)       | t(215) = -2.55, p = .020 |
| Clarity         | 3.69 (.59)       | 3.63 (.65)       | t(215) = 0.73, p = .469 |
| Repair          | 3.53 (.71)       | 3.60 (.73)       | t(215) = -0.61, p = .544 |

DISCUSSION

General strain theory suggests that violence is more likely when an individual does not pay attention to their emotions and is unable to repair their negative moods. We hypothesized that differences in these two aspects of meta-awareness of emotion may explain differences in incarceration rates between men and women. This study replicated previous research (Thayer et al., 2003) showing that men pay significantly less attention to emotions than women. However, we found no sex difference in repair. Thus, this study does not support the claim that general strain theory can explain incarcerated rates. This negative result should be interpreted with two limitations in mind. First, the TMMS is a self-report instrument (Salovey et al., 1995). Men claim that they are as good as women at repairing their emotions, but they may be over-estimating their abilities. Second, we did not measure delinquency or criminal behavior of our participants. It could be that general strain theory can explain differences in the incarceration rates for violent crimes but not non-violent crimes for example. Future research should examine meta-awareness of emotions for men and women who have been convicted of the same crimes, for both violent and non-violent crimes.

Given that general strain theory cannot explain differences in crime between men and women, what can explain these differences? Previous research has shown that men and women use different strategies to repair their emotions. Consistent with the current finding that women pay more attention to their emotions, previous research has found that women tend to use emotion-focused coping whereas men tend to use avoidance-focused coping (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). Emotion-focused coping is a strategy where people focus on their emotions and thus manage the distress that they experience (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Pearlin & Schooler). It can include crying, asking for advice, and talking about one's emotions (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). In contrast, avoidance-focused coping is a strategy where people deny that the distress is real (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Pearlin & Schooler). The individual may watch TV, exercise, or talk to friends about things that are unrelated to the problem that is making them upset. Men who use avoidance-focused coping are likely to deal with negative emotions via antisocial behavior or substance abuse (Howerton & Gundy, 2006; Rosenfield, 1999). Men may avoid emotion-focused coping because men's gender socialization experiences shape their self-concepts as men (Howerton & Gundy, 2006). They may feel that the benefits of asking for emotional support and advice do not outweigh the negative social label of being viewed as emotional and weak (Rosenfield, 1999). Future research should examine the efficacy of each specific coping strategy that men and women use to relieve negative emotion. Perhaps men are incarcerated more frequently because they are more likely to choose ineffective strategies (which fail to relieve their negative emotions) and strategies that involve criminal behaviors.

REFERENCES

Thayer, J. F., Rossy, L., Ruiz-Padial, E., & Johnsen, B. H. (2003). Gender differences in the meta-awareness of emotions for men and women who have been convicted of the same crimes, for both violent and non-violent crimes.

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